The Tantura ‘Massacre’

Historian Benny Morris has published an updated version of his landmark 1988 book on the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem. The new material he has uncovered, he says, indicates that Israeli soldiers were involved in more massacres of Arabs and other war crimes in the 1948 War of Independence than previously believed.

In the article below, Morris details his research regarding one alleged massacre site, at what is today Kibbutz Nahsholim, in May 1948. In all, Morris says he has found evidence of about two dozen cases of massacre and numerous other acts of arbitrary killing, and about 12 cases of rape.

However, in a recent interview with the Hadaretz Daily, Morris argued that the total of fewer than 800 Arabs killed in war crimes was ‘peanuts’ in comparison to atrocities committed by other people, even in recent decades, in similar civil wars: ‘When you take into account that there was a bloody civil war here and that we lost an entire 1 percent of our population, you find that we behaved well.’ Morris also claimed that David Ben-Gurion covered up for those involved in the massacres and added that Ben-Gurion was ‘a transferist,’ someone who recognized that it was ‘necessary’ to uproot 700,000 Palestinians from the incipient sovereign Israel—because ‘without the uprooting of the Palestinians, a Jewish state would not have been possible.’ Indeed, Morris argued that Ben-Gurion erred in not forcibly removing all the Arabs from the West Bank, Gaza and Israel itself, and that the conclusion of the events at Tantura—may henceforth be perceived in an entirely new context.

Benny Morris

Between Kibbutz Nahsholim and Moshav Dor, on the Mediterranean coast some 30 kilometers south of Haifa, a dirt parking lot serves visitors to the adjacent beach. Beneath its off-white, dusty surface, by some palm trees, lies an unmarked mass grave, where troops of the nascent Israeli Army in May 1948 buried the dead of Tantura.

The grave, says Teddy Katz, who took me there, contains the remains of as many as 200-250 Arab villagers. A small minority, he says, died in the fighting, when the troops of the Alexandroni Brigade conquered the village on May 23, a week after the State of Israel was declared and the Arab armies invaded Palestine; most were massacred after the battle.

This is also what Katz, a 59-year-old peace activist—who was speaking to me just after distributing food in West Bank Arab villages—argued in an MA thesis submitted to Haifa University in 1998.

Alexandroni veterans passionately insist there was no massacre and that the grave holds only the remains of 70-75 villagers who died during the battle. The veterans sued Katz, a member of Kibbutz Magal, for libel, charging—and proving—that he had falsified evidence. During the trial—“in a moment of weakness,” as Katz now puts it—he recanted and apologized. The court adopted his recantation as its verdict. Haifa University, which had given him an A+ for the thesis, suspended his degree and invited him to revise and resubmit it. He complied—but repeated the massacre allegation. Five specially appointed examiners failed the revised thesis by a margin of 3:2. In a supreme gesture of appeasement and ambiguity, the university then awarded Katz a “second-class” degree, which effectively barred his path to PhD candidacy in Israel. On the legal track, Katz recanted his recantation and appealed the lower court’s verdict to the Supreme Court—but it turned him down.

Katz and some of his supporters charged that the university and even the courts were politically motivated, intent on suppressing dissenting historiographic voices and upholding Israel’s image. University authorities, off the record, say similar things about Katz’s motives, pointing out that he received $8,000 from the PLO to cover his legal fees and that his most vocal supporter is the anti-Zionist revisionist Haifa University historian Ilan Pappe, who has strongly supported the boycott of Israel’s universities by western academics during the past three years.

The affair raises the stark issue of whether there was a massacre at Tantura and if so, was it exceptional or, as some have alleged, one of many perpetrated by Jewish forces, including the Haganah/Israel Defense Forces, during 1948? It also raises some important academic questions: What is the value of oral testimony in establishing historical facts? How do the motives of historians affect their reconstruction of the past?

To tackle the first issue, a proposal has
subject "by chance." He intended to write about the Arab exodus from Haifa but his supervisor, Druse historian Katz Firouz, suggested that he focus on a cluster of nearby villages. Born and raised in Haifa, he was a Sea Scout in his early teens and he knew the Tanatura beach. "We used to land our boats there and play," he says. "I had no idea that I would uncover a massacre, and I had no political motive in pursuing the subject."

He secured archives and conducted over 130 interviews with refugees and soldiers, tapping many but not all. He unearthed no document from 1948 that even mentioned a "massacre" in Tanatura. But the witnesses were something else. "I first spoke to villagers in the Wadi Ara area [about 20 kilometers east of Tanatura], and I noticed that whenever I said "Tanatura" they made a face. I asked why. And they said 'A big massacre.' Then I interviewed Tanatura refugees, and I heard story after story." Most Alexandroni veterans denied the allegations of massacre; a few hinted at dark deeds; others refused to talk.

In March 1998 Katz submitted the 211-page thesis, "The Exodus of Arabs from Villages at the Foot of Southern Mount Carmel in 1948." Pappe, a Middle East historian, acted as Katz's unofficial supervisor, and is warmly thanked in the acknowledgments.

The bulk of the paper is devoted to Tanatura, and its conquest by Alexandroni's 33rd Battalion. Village elders, under pressure from militias, had refused to surrender. Tanatura was seen by the Hagannah command as a threat to the main Tel Aviv-Haifa road, and a maritime entry point for arms from Lebanon.

Katz asserted on the basis of more than 20 interviews, that for hours after the battle ended, the troops conducted "a lethal hunt after adult males, in order to kill them, wherever they were found, in the houses, in the courtyards and in the streets." Later, he wrote, the killing continued after prisoners were concentrated in the village cemetery. "No more than 10 or 20 of the men of the village fell in the battle, but by the end of that day there were no fewer than 200 to 250 dead adult males, in circumstances in which the villagers were without arms and completely defenseless," Katz wrote.

Katz quotes Alexandroni veteran Micho Vitton describing how his company commander, Nahman Kaplansky (Karun), interrogated prisoners to find out where weapons were hidden, and then shot them with his pistol, "one after another." He quotes Abu al-Hafiz Muhamen (Abu Nabil), a Tanatura refugee, aged 7 at the time, who spoke of seeing "the Jews take six or seven young men or maybe more, and shooting them in sight of everyone, without cause, and this is something I can never forget. Maybe before then they had been combatants."

Some Jewish witnesses, according to Katz, recalled a different order of killing. A number of Alexandroni soldiers of C Company had been killed or wounded in an incident in which Arabs opened fire after surrendering. In response, C Company's troops, according to Yosef Gefi, "went through the village and slaughtered whoever they saw... at least 140 or 150 persons were killed."

Arab witness Rizluk Ishmawi (Abu Sa'id), who was 13 in 1948, recalled walking through the village accompanied by an Israeli soldier looking for bread and seeing a group of 10-12 Israeli soldiers line up 25 Arab men against a wall and shoot them, as well as one woman.

Katz quotes Alexandroni engineers officer Shlomo Ambar as saying: "The picture etched in my memory is of the adult males at the cemetery. There I saw many men being killed... I left the place when I saw they were killing and killing and killing. That's why I don't know how many exactly were killed there." Faiz Ahmad Tanjil (Abu Khalid), is quoted as recalling: " Afterwards, they took seven to 10 men and brought them near the mosque, shot them and returned and took another group. Thus, perhaps, about 90... men [were killed]."

Katz also cites witnesses who said Jewish troops raped one or two women and robbed villagers of jewelry and money.

Late on May 23, several hundred adult
males were packed off to POW camps; the remaining inhabitants, a thousand women and children, were trucked to nearby Fureidis, which had surrendered to the Haganah two weeks earlier. In mid-June, according to IDF documents, almost all the refugees from Tantuwa were bused out of Fureidis, under Red Cross supervision, to Tel Karm, in the Israeli-held area of the West Bank, where many of them, and their descendants, still live in the Nuk Shama refugee camp.

Katz firmly placed the conquest of Tantuwa and the expulsion of its inhabitants within the context of the Haganah's Plan D, whose purpose was to clear inland areas, especially along main arteries, and the border areas, about to be assaulted by the Arab armies, of militia forces and hostile or potentially hostile villages that harbored them. (Palestinian and pro-Palestinian historians, such as Walid Khalidi and Ilan Pappe, view Plan D, in my view wrongly, as the Jewish "master plan" of expulsion.) Katz does not specifically link the alleged massacre to Plan D — but attributes it to a thirst for revenge among soldiers whose relatives and comrades had been killed and mutilated by Arab militiamen.

In September 1998 Katz's supervisor, Filo, and two examiners — Yair Hirschfeld (who was involved in the secret Israeli-PLO talks that resulted in the 1993 Oslo agreement), and Israeli Arab historian Muhammad Yazbeck — gave Katz 97 percent. In June 2000, the university awarded Katz a first class MA (with a 93 average), qualifying him to continue for a Ph.D.

On January 21, 2000, journalist Amira Gilat published a magazine piece in the Ma’ariv daily based on Katz's thesis and interviews he conducted with Tantuwa refugees and Alexandroni veterans. The refugees all maintained there had been a massacre of atrocities and massacres; the veterans, and residents of Zikhron Ya’akov all denied it, but threw out some troubling hints. The article left readers with the sense there had been a massacre or, at least, that the Alexandroni veterans were hiding something. The veterans protested to Ma’ariv, and Gilat wrote a follow-up, in which the ex-soldiers again uniformly denied a massacre, but were not mollified. For most, 1948 had been a golden moment, the point at which their lives intersected heroically, triumphantly, with history; their deeds in that war are the stories they tell their grandchildren. Now in their 70s and 80s, they weren’t going to let anyone tarnish that memory.

"My soul knew no peace," wrote Amizia Amrami, now 81, in his deposition to the district court. A platoon commander, he was wounded twice at Tantuwa. "I called other veterans and said we must do something." The veterans claimed Amrami's son-in-law, Giora Erdman, 46, a Peace Now activist and a lawyer; his mother, Racheli Liberman, sitting in the Alexandroni's 32nd Battalion. "I asked her about the massacre story," says Erdman. "She said: 'It never happened. I would have known.'"

In April 2000, the Alexandroni Veterans sued Katz for libel in the Tel Aviv District Court, arguing that Katz's charges were "deliberate lies published under the cloak of scientific research." The plaintiffs described themselves as "behaving toward their enemies according to the severe ethical standards before them difficult days."

Meanwhile at Haifa University, a group of professors began lobbying for annulment of Katz’s MA, arguing that he had deliberately distorted testimony to prove his conclusion, itself politically driven under Pappe’s tutelage. The university appointed a committee of four to examine Katz’s use of evidence and to compare the tapes of his interviews with quotations in the thesis. The committee found a series of distortions and inventions. Erdman found more. For example, in his thesis, Katz quotes Ali Abd-al Rahman al-Arja’s (Abu Fahmi) as saying: "While this was happening, soldiers with Bren guns walked on both sides and occasionally fired, killing and wounding (captured) adult males. Abu Fahmi also said: "They gathered all the inhabitants of the village in the square, lined them up facing walls and murdered them with their own hands. I was witness to this crime. Some 55 persons were murdered; I wrote down the names of the dead."

None of this, I can confirm, appears in Katz’s tape of his interview with Abu Fahmi. To the contrary, Katz repeatedly press- es Abu Fahmi: "Clearly, people were shot after they surrendered" — to which Abu Fahmi can be heard replying: "We did not see them killing after we raised our hands."

Katz quoted Shlomo Ambar as saying: "Even the Germans didn’t kill unarmed and defenseless prisoners. After all, those who were their prisoners returned home alive. Here in Tantuwa, Arabs were murdered." But the words, "Here in Tantuwa, Arabs were murdered," aren’t on the tape of the interview, I can confirm. Katz knows that several of his interviewees said things after his batteries ran out.

Katz’s cross-examination, Katz broke down and signed a letter of apology stating: "I did not mean to say that there had been a massacre in Tantuwa and today, as well, I say there was no massacre at Tantuwa. I believe the Alexandroni veterans who flatly denied that a massacre had taken place." But within days Katz withdrew his recantation and he refused to publish a letter of apology in the press, as he had promised.

The university’s suspension of Katz’s degree and offer to let him revise the thesis did not satisfy the outraged anti-Katz lobby, which demanded annulment of the degree, plus measures against Pappe.

With Filo still his supervisor, Katz re-submitted his thesis, now 568 pages long, in September 2002. He corrected the misquotations and distortions and reinforced the text with an appendix of lengthy verbatim transcriptions from his interviews. He remained adamant that Alexandroni troops had massacred dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Tantuwa villagers after the battle. The university appointed five examiners who, by a 3:2 margin, failed the thesis. The two who passed it gave Katz 83 and 85. One of those who failed it awarded the thesis a 74, and may not have known that this was a failing mark. The other two who failed it, giving it 40 and 50, were Dr. Avraham Sela (Hebrew University) and Dr. Amnon Golan (Haifa University). Three years ago, together with Hebrew U. professor Alon Kadish, those two scholars authored "The Conquest of Lydda, July 1948," published by the Israeli Defense Ministry Press. The slim volume, apologetic in focus and intent, argued that the Israeli Army had carried out only a “partial expulsion” of the populations of the Arab towns of Lydda and Ramleh and dismissed
the charge that the troops massed in Lydda townpeople, some of them inside a mosque, on July 12, 1948.

In fact, according to IDF records from 1948, when the town was under occupation and Yiftah Brigade troops killed some 250 townpeople. Oral testimony of Yiftah veterans, deposited in the Yiftah Memorial Archive in Kibbutz Ginosar, asserts that the troops fired one or more bazooka rounds into the mosque compound, where dozens of Arab POWs were being held. The authors even

failed to mention the expulsion order signed by Lt. Col. "Yitzhak R." (Rabin), the operations officer, which ordered the Yiftah Brigade to expel "the inhabitants of Lydda."

EDDY KATZ MAY HAVE WRITTEN, and rewritten, a bad thesis; he may have recanted and then recanted his recantation. But does this prove that there wasn't a massacre in Tantura? Not really. I listened to some of Katz's taped interviews with Alexandroni veterans, interrogated some myself, and interviewed one of Katz's more solid Arab witnesses — and came away with a deep sense of unease.

I interviewed Rizik Ishmawi in his Fureidis flat. He runs a successful earth-moving equipment company and says that Jewish firms have canceled contracts with him since he told Katz and then Giltai his Tantura massacre story. His son, unhappy with the consequences of his media statements, shushed at him while I was there, but Ishmawi nevertheless recounted his tale to me.

The Alexandroni veterans I interviewed — Shlomo Amber, Amatzia Arzrami, Moshe Gershoni, Ya'akov Erez — cleave to the brigade's official history, "The Alexandroni Brigade in the War of Independence" (IDF Press, 1964), which devotes 11 pages to Tantura, with no hint of massacre or atrocities; it even omits mention of the expulsion, though the veterans today sheepishly acknowledge the forced exodus. It ends with an account of the troops taking a swim before leaving the site.

The Katz-Tantura affair teaches us that one cannot base a reconstruction of events on the testimony of witnesses decades afterward. Faulty memory, political interests, flaws in transmission or translation — all impair credibility. In a case like Tantura, played out against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Palestinian demands for a "return," Arabs will "recall" Israeli monstrousness and Israelis their own blamlessness. Historians must rely on contemporary documentary evidence.

So if there was a massacre at Tantura, why is there no trace of it in the available records, Israeli, U.N., British, American, or Arab?

A simple answer is that mass murderers rarely leave written records of their crimes, and the murdered can't. However, in my long study of the Israeli-Arab conflict and, specifically, the 1948 war, my experience has been that wherever there was smoke, there was fire: Almost invariably, a document surfaces corroborating oral traditions of massacre. Take Deir Yassin: For decades, the Palestinians listened to an oral tradition of massacre while veterans of the two Israeli groups involved in fighting in the Arab village on the outskirts of Jerusalem on April 9, 1948, maintained their blamlessness. But over the decades, British and, more recently, Haifa and Jerusalem have surfaced corroborating the core of this oral tradition — though not its exaggerations. The same applies to more than a dozen massacres (including at Mafraq, Majd al-Kurum, Arab al-Mawsil, al-Diraj and Safad) in May and October 1948 in which, Israeli and U.N. documents attest, several hundred Palestinians were killed, all told.

In the Tantura case, so far, no such evidence has surfaced. Millions of army documents from 1948 have not yet been screened and declassified, and perhaps an Israeli or Arab diary entry will yet surface. But so far, there is nothing.

Or almost nothing. There is one 1948 document that gives off the rancid smell of atrocity. But it is not as explicit as a historian would like. An Alexandroni man, Tzili Makovsky, died in battle on June 1, 1948. But a week before, he was in Tantura and dined in his diary: "On the hill to the left were snipers who succeeded in hitting too many people. Two squads were sent to catch them. I was in one of them. After advancing according to the rule book, we succeeded in catching six snipers. We discovered their arms after firing to frighten them. What I learned there was that our boys know the craft of murder quite well... especially boys whose relatives the Arabs had murdered... or those harmed by Hitler [they are the same fascists]. They took their private revenge, and avenged our comrades who had died at their hands, against the snipers. I felt that in doing this they were unmasking all the anger and letting out all the bitterness that had accumulated..." Israel's 1948 documentation declassified over the past decade indicates that Alexandroni's commanders didn't want Tantura to surrender, as this might have entailed its continued existence behind the Israeli lines (like Fureidis, further inland). The May 22, 1948 operational order for the conquest of the village, by the commander of the 33rd Battalion, made no mention of what should become of the inhabitants.

The initial post-battle report, apparently from May 26, by "Arvaham," the brigade intelligence officer, reported that the enemy had suffered "about 20 dead" and that 300 adult males and 200 women and children had been taken prisoner. A follow-up report, by A Company's deputy commander, written on May 26, said nothing about the fate of civilians, though it mentioned the need to put an end to the looting by troops and civilians from nearby Jewish settlements. No one mentioned a massacre or atrocities.

But the conquest of Tantura did give rise to a series of enigmatic documents. None of the three versions of a report on the Tantura operation by Ya'akov Epstein — Yekub al-Mukhtar (Yekub the Headman), as the Tantura Arabs called him — who served as a liaison between Zikhron Ya'akov and its Arab villagers, mentions a massacre. And nowhere does he say that his arrival on the morning of May 22 put an end to a massacre (as several of Katz's Arab witnesses alleged). He does say that he found dead Arabs scattered about "the approaches to the village," in the streets, in the alleys, in the village houses and around it": that Alexandroni commanders asked him to look over the adult males, who were sitting in two long rows, and identify any non-locals; that he organized the gathering and burial of the
Why would the chief of staff take an interest in Arabs’ cows?

dozens, if not hundreds, of villagers, and that Arab radio stations would not have announced this? Of course, it is possible that the woman spoke of a massacre and the radio stations broadcast this — but the Israeli military has denied it from their report.

And there is a least enigmatic piece of documentary evidence. A week after the battle of Tantura, the IDF chief of staff, Yigal Alon, in his report, cited the commanding officer of the Alexandroni Brigade, Dan Even: “I have been told by the Department of Arab Affairs (he probably meant the newly created Minority Affairs Ministry) that our soldiers who entered Tantura carried out many acts of sabotage after the conquest and needlessly. Please inform me to what extent the things I have been told are true and what have you done to prevent such acts in the future.” The Alexandroni Brigade commander responded the following day: “A certain amount of damage was caused by our people immediately after they entered the place. This was due mainly to ‘the enthusiasm of victory’ and explicit orders were issued forbidding a repetition of such incidents.”

What was this exchange about? Two 33rd Battalion veterans I interviewed explained that the messages, in using the word “sabotage” (hibatsah, in Hebrew), referred, in code, to the plunder by Zikhron Ya’akov farmers of abandoned Arab livestock. To me this makes little sense: Would evidence, this must remain speculation.

So what happened in Tantura? As things stand, there is no way to reach a clear determination: It is the word of several aging Arab refugees against that of the solid phalanx of aging Alexandroni veterans. The refugees’ tale of a rolling massacre echoes and may, indeed, derive from the tale of Tantura told in the memoir by Muslem preacher and politician Nimr al-Khaliib from Haifa, “The Catastrophe of Palestine.” The account is based on the purported testimony of a single eyewitness. Khaliib’s book, originally published in Beirut in 1950 or 1951, carries the first published description of a large-scale, systematic massacre at Tantura.

The fact that none of the refugees went on record in 1948 itself, or anytime before the 90s, stating that a massacre had taken place is surely worthy of attention. Even Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi’s encyclopedic survey of the lost villages, “All That Remains,” [Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992], in a sense the embodiment of the Palestinian collective memory of 1948, makes no mention of a massacre at Tantura. But atrocities — war crimes, in modern parlance — appear to have occurred. Many of the Tantura dead, even if they only numbered 70-75 as Alexandroni veterans would have it, were unarmed civilians or disarmed militiamen. A number of Alexandroni veterans said as much in undisputed interviews. We have Makov’s diary and Micho Vilson’s statements, both to Katz and to Glat, that there was execution of prisoners by B Company’s commander, Kami, and that there had been “killing.”

A TOTAL P. 06